

Pragati

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A sense of history

SPECIAL ISSUE

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY
WHAT GENETIC STUDIES SAY
PORTS OF CALL
AN EAST SEA STORY
THROUGH FOREIGN EYES

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INDIAN HISTORY

Towards a shared understanding

And why it is important

NITIN PAI

IN HIS introduction to *The Shield of Achilles*, Philip Bobbitt argues that history “is the distinctive element in the ceaseless, restless dynamic by means of which strategy and law live out their necessary relationship with each other. For law and strategy are not merely made in history—a sequence of events and culminating effects—they are made of history. It is the self-portrayal of a society that enables it to know its own identity. Without this knowledge a society cannot establish its rule by law because every system of laws depends upon the continuity of legitimacy, which is an attribute of identity. Furthermore, without such a self-portrayal, no society can pursue a rational strategy because it is the identity of the society that strategy seeks to promote, protect and preserve. One might say that without its own history, its self-understanding, no society can have either law or strategy, because it cannot be constituted as an independent entity”.

Mr Bobbitt then makes a profound conclusion: that together, history, strategy and law make possible legitimate governing institutions. He goes on to argue that “there is no state without strategy, law and history, and, to complicate matters, these are not merely interrelated elements, they are elements each composed at least partly of others. The precise nature of this composition defines a particular state and is the result of many choices...Law cannot come into being until the state achieves a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Similarly, a society must have a single legitimate government for its strategic designs to be laid; otherwise, the distinction between war and civil war collapses, and strategy degenerates into banditry. Until the governing institutions of a society can claim for themselves the sole right to determine the legitimate use of force at home and abroad, there can be no state. Without law, strategy cannot claim to be a legitimate act of state. Only if law prevails can it confer legitimacy on strategic choices and give them a purpose. Yet the legitimacy necessary for law and for strategy derives from history, the understanding of past practices that characterise a particular society.”

It follows that to the extent a state lacks a shared, cohesive understanding of its own history,

its choice of geopolitical strategy and domestic public policies will be less than optimal. A state that, for example, conjures up a historical narrative that fits ideology, not fact, very often ends up as a threat to its neighbours and almost always to its own people. Yet, in the end, it is ideology that has to bow to history. Even the bloody depredations of Mao Zedong’s many revolutions failed to erase China’s past and today his successors are promoting Confucius Institutes around the world. Pakistan tried to build a nation using a selective reading of its past—the project failed once in 1971, but its sponsors did not correct course, leading to it being on the crossroads when it is not actually in crisis.

A shared understanding of history forms the basis for social reconciliation and sets the stage for policies that pursue the national interest.

On the other hand, a shared understanding of history forms the basis for social reconciliation and sets the stage for policies that pursue the national interest—the happiness and well-being of the greatest number of its citizens. The more homogenous a society is, the easier it is to achieve such an understanding. Yet the less homogenous a society is, the more important it is to do so. In any case, the scientific method—that relies on evidence and enquiry—is without doubt the best known way to achieve that common understanding.

India’s rich civilisational history is a priceless asset—for instance, it cannot be a mere accident that India is the only country in the vast expanse between Europe and Japan that has managed to sustain a liberal democracy.

Unfortunately contending views of the past have clouded contemporary national life. In politics, history is made an accomplice in the pursuit of increasingly violent ethnic and caste-based

chauvinism. In public policy, economic freedom lies hostage to the dubious demands of social justice. In foreign affairs, the inability to completely jettison historical baggage impairs the pragmatic pursuit of the national interest. This is not to say that achieving a broad consensus on the past will miraculously solve the many problems India faces, but rather, that it will help clear the decks.

Modern history books in India were first written under the influence of British colonialism. While it is wrong to indiscriminately disparage historical narratives that were first thrown up in the colonial era, the fact that many survive without critical examination—and worse, in spite of being challenged by it—is unacceptable. Yet they do, not least because the Indian historical establishment in the hands of an intellectual oligopoly, which in turn, is sustained by chronic under-investment in the higher education system and the lack of career opportunities for students of social sciences.

The good news is that for the first time in decades, the intellectual oligopoly has begun to be challenged—by developments in the world of science and technology. For instance, a group of In-

dian researchers recently challenged the conventional wisdom on the nature of the yet-undeciphered Indus script using relatively simple computational methods that had never before been applied in the discipline. The availability of inexpensive images of the Earth has not only transformed the field, but has sprung an entire community of ‘armchair archaeologists’. Indeed, the wider application of genetic studies means that there is now a “DNA test” for historical theories. Like in the case of criminal investigations, these tests are conclusive and can embarrass some people.

So there are exciting times ahead and the clear stream of reason will eventually find its way out of the dreary desert sand of dead habit. In the end, science will triumph over ideology

Nitin Pai is editor of *Pragati* and blogs at *The Acorn* (acorn.nationalinterest.in)

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

Getting objective about it

Historical narratives must be stress-tested before acceptance

JAYAKRISHNAN NAIR

IN JANUARY 2009, PBS, a US television network, ran a documentary titled *The Story of India*. Hosted by Michael Wood, this six-part series narrated a compressed history of India from prehistoric times till Independence. The first episode—*Beginnings*—discussed one of the most controversial topics in Indian history: the origin of the Aryans.

In this episode Mr Wood did three things. Standing at Khyber Pass, looking down at the valley of Kabul river, he quoted the translation of a verse from *Baudhayana Srautasutra* which reads, “some went east..but some stayed at home in the west”. This verse, Wood opined, suggests an Aryan migration from Afghanistan into India.

Second, he went to Turkmenistan to meet Viktor Sarianidi, the legendary Russian archaeologist, who besides unearthing the Bactrian gold in northern Afghanistan, found horses, wheeled ve-

hicles and mud-brick fire altars in Gonur Tepe, Turkmenistan. According to Dr Sarianidi, the Aryans arrived there around 2000 BC and left in 1800 BC towards Afghanistan.

Third, Mr Wood mentioned a 1786 discovery by the polyglot Sir William Jones on the similarities between Sanskrit and various European languages, due to which if a Sanskrit speaker mentioned the word *ashva*, a Lithuanian farmer would know exactly what he meant. All these indicated that the ancestors of the Aryans were part of a language group which spread from the area between Caspian sea and Aral mountains 4000 years ago. As per this theory, these Sanskrit speaking newcomers subjugated the natives—Dravidians and tribals—and established themselves at the top of the caste hierarchy.

Sounds logical, but Mr Wood’s claims are controvertible. According to B B Lal, who was the



Photo: Evan Osherow

director general of the Archaeological Survey of India, the correct translation of *Baudhayana Srautasutra* says that while some Aryan tribes went east and the others went west from some intermediary point. This intermediary point for Dr Lal is not the valley of the Kabul river, but that of the Indus.

In a lecture given at the 19th International Conference on South Asian Archaeology in July 2007, Dr Lal analysed Dr Sarianidi's evidence—fire-worship, soma rituals, *ashvamedha*—and in the case of fire worship he proved that the direction of movement was from India to Central Asia. He also showed that there was no soma in Gonur Tepe, and the skeleton of the horse was unrelated to *asvamedha*.

Now genetic studies too are challenging the Aryan migration theory, the successor of the discredited Aryan invasion theory. Some studies have revealed that Southern castes and tribes are similar to each other and their gene pool is related to the castes of North India. It was not possible to confirm any difference between the caste and tribal pools and find any clean delineation between the Dravidian and Indo-European speakers. Another study compared the genes of Brahmins and tribals and found that they shared the same origins. Also, there was no evidence for a massive migration in the 1500-1200 BC period.

If so where did the Aryans originate? In the accompanying book, Mr Wood mentions that many Indian scholars and polemicists believe that Aryans were indigenous to India. Gavin Flood, senior lecturer in religious studies at the Univer-

sity of Stirling, Scotland, is neither an Indian nor a polemicist, but in his book *Introduction to Hinduism*, he mentions the Aryan migration theory, but also the alternate: the cultural transformation thesis. According to this view, the Aryan culture was an indigenous development in the Indus valley, uninfluenced by invaders or migrants. Thus Hinduism evolved with the Aryan culture interacting with non-Aryan and tribal cultures. This cultural transformation thesis works well with the Out of India theory according to which India is the Indo-European homeland from where some groups migrated to Central and West Asia and Europe.

The Debates and Consequences

Fuelling the debate over Aryans and their origins are various schools—the Orientalist, the Nationalist and the Marxist—with different positions. This seems perfect since the bias of each of these schools will get corrected by opinions from other schools. Unfortunately in Indian historiography, some schools are more equal than the other. Blessed by the Indian government and aided by a list of approved scholars, only certain versions of history get into school textbooks. Thus genetic studies which overwhelmingly contradict the Aryan Migration Theory never see the light of the day. One state government—West Bengal—even goes so far as to publicly declare what is *shuddho* and what is *ashuddo*. Thus depending on the clerisy running the Indian Council of Historical Studies, the colour of history oscillates between saffron and red.

In such an atmosphere, when the government

is a partner in identity politics, promoting one version of history and silencing others, the chips are not allowed to fall where they should. When a historian, who identifies himself with a label—Orientalist, Marxist or Nationalist—controls the debate, history is a prisoner of dogma. Such labelled historians silence unpopular ideas, keep inconvenient facts in the dark and display intellectual cowardice.

In this acerbic debate, any one who opposes the Aryan migration theory is branded a Hindu nationalist out to eliminate other minorities from India. But Edwin Bryant, in his book, *The Quest for the origins of Vedic culture*, notes that there are a number of Western scholars too who don't believe in the external origins of Aryans. Among the Indian scholars who he met during his research, "one prominent Indigenous Aryanist turned out to be an atheist and very irreverent Marxist."

The media can play an activist role in this debate. In 1993, a decision by Mexico's education minister not to publish new history books as they

When the government is a partner in identity politics, promoting one version of history and silencing others, the chips are not allowed to fall where they should. Unpopular ideas are silenced and inconvenient facts are kept in the dark.

did not conform to the "preferred version" resulted in considerable outrage. The Mexican media pursued the story and critically evaluated the text books the same way Indian media panned the Murli Manohar Joshi's revisions.

Parents too can be activists. In California, upset by the representation of Hinduism in school textbooks, Indian-Americans filed a lawsuit against the Board of Education demanding edits. One of the disputes was about the Aryan theory and during the hearing, a California curriculum commissioner, Stan Metzenberg, said "I've read the DNA research and there was no Aryan migration. I believe the hard evidence of DNA more than I believe historians." We have to wait and see if the text books will actually reflect the change.

Politicians too can be activists. In Kerala, there was a controversy last year over text books which highlighted communist struggles over the freedom struggle, ignored non-communist social leaders, and used a picture of a frog instead of that of Mahatma Gandhi. When it was suspected that the Communists were trying to teach athe-

ism, Hindus, Muslims and Christians united in opposition. The Opposition staged walkouts. Finally the curriculum committee agreed to modify the text.

Such activism, from the media, from the parents, from opposition politicians, is missing when it comes to balancing the distortions in existing textbooks.

Lawsuits, protests, activism—these can be an effective tools, but there is also a need to popularise the discourse. Stephen Ambrose, David McCullough are masters of the popular history genre in the West. Barring a few honourable exceptions, in the Indian context this genre consists of writing more biographies of Nehru and Gandhi. There is a need to add more voices to this discourse—to explain how the invasion theory evolved to migration theory to Aryan trickle down theory—because this Aryan-Dravidian race theory still has serious social and political implications in India.

In 1915, Justice Mahadeo Govind Ranade lamented that the Aryan Brahmins were few in number to make any influence on the aboriginal races in the South. Opponents claimed that aborigines were robbed by the Aryan invaders of their culture. Periyar E V Ramaswami Naicker, went one step further: he despised Hinduism, asked Tamils to liberate themselves from the Aryan yoke and claimed Ravana was the Dravidian hero, not Rama. Recently, Dravidar Kazhagam leader K Veeramani called for people to reject "Aryan" leaders. The politicians who promote a ideology of caste hatred that should not be able to get away with their fundamentalist agenda.

For this we need to evolve from Stalinised history and saffronised history to objective history—on Aryan theory, on Hindu-Muslim relations, on Independence struggle—by weeding out absurd 'nationalist' claims and distortions written for religious appeasement. Theories on the origins of Indian civilisation must correlate with archaeological, linguistic and genetic evidence. The standard for acceptance of theories and hypotheses must not be government approval, religious sanction or secular ideological compliance, but rather ability to withstand the scientific stress test on a level playing field.

GENETIC STUDIES

The peopling of India

A genomic unity that goes back 50,000 years

MICHEL DANINO

FROM A structuralist perspective, there is probably no queerer theory than that of an invasion of India by Aryans or Indo-Aryans in the second millennium BC. In its nineteenth-century version, it posited a subcontinent peopled by undefined autochthons (that is, the earliest known inhabitants) was suddenly submerged, in its northern parts at least, by a wave or several waves of Aryan invaders on the warpath. This view, with numerous variants, generally held until the 1960s, when US and Indian archaeologists began pointing out that such a phenomenon could hardly have taken place without leaving some traces in the archaeological record, which not only stubbornly refused to yield such evidence at site after site, but increasingly stressed continuity rather than disruption. The Hollywood-style Aryan Long March soon mutated into a leisurely stroll into India by bands of peaceful migrants in search of greener pastures.

But one central question remained: whether an invasion or a migration—and leaving aside here its assumed linguistic and cultural impact—not radically alter India's demographic landscape? The answer, clearly, could only be a matter of proportion. Either the newcomers arrived in large numbers, or they just "trickled in," yet somehow managed to trigger off a chain reaction, perhaps like the proverbial butterfly setting off a distant hurricane, in the spirit of chaos theory. Most proponents of the invasionist or migrationist scenario continued to prefer the former view, insisting that "the Indo-Aryan immigrants seem to have been numerous and strong enough to continue and disseminate much of their culture." Those who, of late, have tried to trim down the numbers of Aryan tribes to the barest minimum have been compelled to do so by two formidable obstacles: the archaeological stumbling block and the growing objections raised from the 1990s by geneticists studying Indian populations, whose voice uncannily sounded like that of archaeologists.

Initially, a few genetic studies appeared to confirm the arrival of a new population from Central Asia, matching the linguistic division between Indo-Aryan and Dravidian speakers. But they

were victims of the usual circularity, *a priori* accepting the invasionist scenario, then matching a limited strand of genetic evidence to it. As the samples studied grew larger and more diverse, and as the tools of the young science became more refined, startling new results have emerged in the last few years.

Basics of genetic studies

Before we briefly review those relevant to the invasion debate, let us refresh our memories. To study the ancestry of human populations, geneticists look at two types of DNA: the Y-DNA, con-

If biologists had never been told anything about the Aryan migration, they would be incapable of inferring it from the DNA of Indians, whether tribes or upper castes,

tained in the Y-chromosome of the cell's nucleus and transmitted from father to son; and the mtDNA or mitochondrial DNA, found in the cell's mitochondria and transmitted by the mother alone. DNA molecules undergo slight alterations or "mutations" in the course of time, which act as specific genetic markers: thus two persons sharing an mtDNA with the same mutation must share a common ancestor somewhere in the maternal line. Those genetic markers are then grouped in categories called "haplotypes," which are in turn organised in "haplogroups," each of which genetically identifies a particular ethnic group. Within such a framework, "genetic distances" between several populations can be assessed, but it is important to remember that haplogroups have nothing to do with the old racial classifications, which have no scientific validity whatsoever: it is impossible to genetically define an "Aryan" race or a Dravidian one.

Chief findings

In India's case, genetic studies are specially complex, not only because of entrenched prejudices on



Photo: Debraj Ghosh

racial or linguistic divisions (and the consequent temptation to equate linguistic groups with ethnic ones), but because of the high genetic diversity of the subcontinent, next only to that of Africa. Yet a few important by-products have emerged from a dozen studies conducted by teams of biologists in Western and Indian universities:

- One study concluded that “high castes share more than 80 percent of their maternal lineages with the lower castes and tribals” and some biologists now speak of a “caste-tribe continuum.” Another study found that “the Indian mtDNA tree in general is not subdivided according to linguistic (Indo-European, Dravidian) or caste affiliations.” In other words, geography, not caste or language, tends to define Indian genetic groups, an important conclusion that runs counter to the invasionist scenario.

- It is worth stressing that “caste populations of ‘north’ and ‘south’ India are not particularly more closely related to each other than they are to the tribal groups.” For instance, “Southern castes and tribals are very similar to each other in their Y-chromosomal haplogroup compositions.” Again, a 2009 study found Brahmins and the caste system to be of “autochthonous origin.”

- Also, studies found linguistic families to be “all much younger” than genetic lineages, and it would be “highly speculative,” at this stage to assume that a “linguistically defined group in India should be considered more ‘autochthonous’ than any other.” This knocks the bottom out of the notion of adivasi propounded by the now discredited nineteenth-century racial anthropology—and still in use in India today despite its lack of scientific validity.

- Even with India’s genetic diversity, its populations, whatever their linguistic areas or castes, share a “fundamental genomic unity” traceable to

the original peopling of India by migrants from Africa some 50,000 years ago.

- Quite a few Indian populations (including tribal ones and Dravidian speakers) exhibit some connection with Central Asian populations; however, this connection turns out to date back to the migration from Africa, not to the second millennium BC.

- Indeed the “deep, common ancestry between the two regions” (India and Central Asia) is more readily explained by northward migrations from India’s Northwest some 40,000 years ago.

Invisible Aryans

The conclusion is inescapable: just as the putative Aryan invasion/migration left no trace in Indian literature, in the archaeological and the anthropological record, it is invisible at the genetic level. If biologists had never been told anything about such a migration, they would be incapable of inferring it from the DNA of Indians, whether tribes or upper castes, from the South or North.

We can now view almost all Indian ethnic groups (except for known recent immigrants, in the North-East for instance) as essentially indigenous. Of course we are all ultimately descendants from Africans, but a period of at least 40,000 years should suffice to earn the label “indigenous.” Moreover, we may jocularly suggest that all non-African populations are basically descendants from Indians. As one study put it, “there are now enough reasons not only to question a ‘recent Indo-Aryan invasion’ into India some 4000 years ago, but alternatively to consider India as a part of the common gene pool ancestral to the diversity of human maternal lineages in Europe.

We must patiently await more advanced studies with larger samples and finer analytic methods. But the genetic wind seems to have turned for good, just as the archaeological wind did some forty years ago. If Indo-Aryans ever migrated to India, they only “trickled in.” But how could such small numbers revolutionise India’s cultural and linguistic landscape? That is another of the many paradoxes on which the invasionist scenario rests, ever more shakily.

Michel Danino is a student of Indian civilisation and has particularly researched its origins, including the Indus-Sarasvati civilisation and its continuity with the classical age. For a more detailed version of this article see “Genetics and the Aryan Debate”, *Puratattva*, No 36, 2005-06, pp 146-154.

GEOLOGICAL STUDIES

The Ghaggar and the Sarasvati

The scientific evidence is against their being one and the same

SUVRAT KHER

IN MAPS of North-west India, the River Ghaggar appears as a small drainage system, flanked by the giant Sutlej to the north and the Yamuna to the south-east. The rivers and its tributaries originate in the Siwalik Hills, meander through the plains of Haryana and Rajasthan where it is called the Hakra and disappears in the sands of western Haryana-Rajasthan near Sirsa. There are claims though made by various Hindu groups such as the *Sarasvati Nadi Shodh Sansthan* and the *Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalan Samiti* that this rather unremarkable river has had a much more impressive past. These and other groups claim that the Ghaggar is in fact the Vedic Sarasvati. The Rig Veda describes the Sarasvati as an important river along with the Indus, Sutlej, Ganga and Yamuna.

For many years supporters of this view were using a combination of the Rig Veda and archaeology as evidence that the Ghaggar is the Vedic Sarasvati. Lately though a different kind of evidence has been brought to bear on this problem—the geological history of the Ghaggar. If geological evidence shows that the Ghaggar was in the past a mighty river and one that had a glacial source, it would fit descriptions in the Rig Veda of a large Sarasvati flowing from the mountains to the sea. More importantly it would allow Hindu religious groups to claim that the Vedic people were present in Northwest India much before the Ghaggar dried up about 1800 BC. That would strengthen their claim that the Harappan civilisation represents the beginning of Vedic civilisation in India. To that end a lot of effort has been undertaken to generate and collect geological data that supports this view. This data comes in three flavours: geomorphologic, petrologic and geochemical. Supporters claim that taken together these three types of data show beyond doubt that the Ghaggar is the Vedic Sarasvati. A more critical viewing of the data does not inspire such confidence.

During their lifetime, rivers meander and cut new channels. The older abandoned channels can be seen in satellite images as dark curvilinear features. This technique of using images to delineate

channels has spurred a lively industry of Sarasvati mappers to trace a maze of paleo-channels surrounding the Ghaggar and extending into the Thar Desert. These traced maps are then used to claim that in the past the Ghaggar had a lot more water in it and that some of these channels represent the Sutlej River which according to them used to flow into the Ghaggar but has changed course and joined the Indus only in recent times. A common element of all these claims is to emphasise that these paleo-channels are as wide as 8-10 km, an indication of a very large river.

There is some real data buried amongst these exaggerations but it does not support the main claim which is that the Sutlej was a tributary of the Ghaggar. No such large channel has been convincingly demonstrated as the Sutlej. And the figures of 8-10 km wide channels are misleading. What has been mapped are the flood plains and channel system. Flood plains of rivers are very wide and appear dark in images because they contain sediment with higher amounts of moisture. This does not mean that the active river channel at any one point in time was very wide. So the evidence from ancient drainage patterns show that the Ghaggar changed course several times in the past and contained more water than it does today. It doesn't show that the Sutlej or for that matter the Yamuna were tributaries of the Ghaggar.

The second type of evidence for the Vedic Sarasvati is based on the sediment composition found in the Markanda and Somb, tributaries of the Ghaggar originating in the Siwaliks. A few years ago V V Puri, a glaciologist who had been working on the Markanda river sediments announced that he had found pebbles composed of high grade metamorphic rocks in some of the river terraces that were around 5,500 years old. He argued that since the Markanda river today flows only through the sedimentary rocks of the Siwaliks, the presence of metamorphic pebbles means that in the past the Markanda river was receiving sediments from streams draining a metamorphic terrain and that source was cut off

sometime later. He identified this source metamorphic terrain as the Jutogh formation of the high crystalline glacial Himalayas. This, he said is irrefutable evidence that the Ghaggar had a glacial source in the past, fitting the description of the Vedic Sarasvati.

This analysis, however, ignores the complex sediment distribution patterns which are in play in Himalayan style collisional basins. The Siwaliks may be sedimentary but they are often composed of pebbles and boulders of metamorphic rocks. When sediments which would in the future become rocks of the Siwaliks hills were being deposited, streams eroding the metamorphic Jutogh formation transported and deposited metamorphic pebbles and boulders in layers known as conglomerates. Later as the Siwalik sediments were consolidated and uplifted as the Siwalik hills a new drainage developed. This drainage represented by the Markanda River started eroding the Siwalik conglomerates and received from them metamorphic pebbles and boulders. This way streams can contain metamorphic pebbles without actually draining a metamorphic source rock. The pebbles have been recycled into the recent streams via an intermediate Siwalik sedimentary source. The presence of metamorphic pebbles is not irrefutable evidence of a glacial source for the Ghaggar. Yet Dr Puri and other Sarasvati supporters continue to present this data as a game clincher.

The third type of evidence is based on the oxygen isotope composition of ancient water in Ghaggar paleo-channels and the strontium and neodymium isotope composition of Ghaggar sediment. During precipitation, the lighter isotope of oxygen will become preferentially enriched in the vapour phase. As clouds lose moisture and rise from the foothills to high elevations they become progressively enriched in the lighter isotope. Glacial derived water therefore will be isotopically lighter than water from Himalayan foothills. The Bhabha Atomic Research Centre has analysed groundwater trapped in paleo-channels in Rajasthan identified as belonging to the Ghaggar-Hakra system. The analysis shows that the water is ancient and is isotopically heavier than water from known glacial sources. This indicates that the Ghaggar was never fed by glaciers.

A similar conclusion has been drawn by a separate study using strontium and neodymium isotopes of Ghaggar sediment. Rocks from the high crystalline Himalayas have a typical signature that Ghaggar sediments lack. Again, this points to the ancient Ghaggar being a Siwalik fed river. Sarasvati supporters ignore these findings

or more bizarrely claim the opposite. They also point out that these aquifers contain fresh water indicating a subterranean Sarasvati still connected to the Himalayas. This is debatable and does not answer the question whether the ancient Ghaggar was sourced from the Siwaliks or from glaciers.

Just how and when did the Ghaggar dry up? Here too a belief that the Sarasvati arose in the glacial Himalayas has led to a preference for the tectonic theory of river desiccation over the better supported climate change theory. The tectonic theory says that the Sutlej and Yamuna—both glacially sourced—flowed into the Ghaggar and tectonic events diverted these channels away drying up the Ghaggar/Sarasvati. To date there has been no serious study that has identified a specific location where this deformation took place and no work that has timed any deformation event to show that it was recent enough to have affected Harappan civilisation.

On the other hand climate data collected from dried up lake sediments in the Thar, the deep sea Indus fan and pollen from Himalayan peat all point to an early Holocene wet phase ending around 3500 BC. North-west India began to dry up although eastwards in the Siwaliks the monsoons were still strong. The Ghaggar would have had enough water to support human habitation due to a wetter source area. By 1800 BC the Thar had totally dried up, rainfall in the source region also decreased and the Ghaggar became too dry to support human activity. Drying progressed from west to east, a trend tracked by shifting human settlements. Younger Harappan and Painted Grey Ware sites (1800–400 BC) occur in eastern Thar and the Ganga Yamuna plains. These patterns cannot be explained by a tectonic theory of river desiccation.

Attempts by Sarasvati revivalist groups to use geological data to equate the Ghaggar with the Vedic Sarasvati have been compromised by the application of poor science and sins of exaggeration and omission. The propaganda however continues. A false geological narrative is being constructed and disseminated. Whether the Vedic people were present on the plains of Haryana and Punjab before the Ghaggar dried up and whether they are the same people who built the Harappan civilisation is not a question that geology can answer. That battle is for archaeologists and linguists. One hopes it is settled by good science and not dogma.

Suvrat Kher writes about geology, evolution and the environment at *Reporting on a Revolution* (suvratk.blogspot.com)

THE MALABAR

Hubs of the medieval trade

During a previous round of globalisation

ULLATTIL MANMADHAN

A NUMBER of modern economists relate globalisation as a phenomenon of the twentieth century. In reality, it has been with us for a long time. Hans-Henrik Holm and Georg Sorensen define globalisation, a term that is used very often today, as 'intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders.' So is it really something new? Not really, but in order to reach that conclusion one must look at the past carefully.

Starting from the time of the Roman empire (or even earlier) through the Islamic period and the Mongol era, globalisation manifested itself in many ways—creating trade routes, shared food habits, changing culture, establishing new religions, changing food habits and shaping fashion. Religions such as Islam and Buddhism were transported to new areas and places. The Silk Road was the means for trading between 2000BC to 1000 AD where people, ideas and goods moved, albeit slowly over hazardous terrain—on camel- or horseback—and fraught with losses. The scene was set for an increase in the other means of movement—sea trade.

It was during the period 1000 to 1500 AD that maritime networks in the Indian Ocean set up a

brisk exchange between the shores of China, South-east Asia, India, Africa and the Middle East. While many would point out that this was generally known as the 'spice trade' or pepper trade, the Indian Ocean trade system involving Indian, Arab and Chinese traders in fact covered much more than spices and existed in an unorganised fashion even before 1000 AD. Spices found great acceptance in Europe during this time and the volume of and profit on these consignments were the catalyst to globalisation of that period, further accelerating the larger Western interest into this lucrative arena, otherwise termed the Indian Ocean emporia. Interestingly, while it was between 1250 to 1350 AD (the Mongol era) that East Asian technology enriched backward Europe, after 1500 AD it was the improved technology from European nations that started to flow back towards Asia.

For trade to thrive amongst dissimilar communities, there has to be a certain order in aspects such as currency and trade rules, an overall trust and faith among people, existence of a methodology of compensation or exchange (barter) and finally an administration in various ports of call that has to allow for arbitration and loss mitigation.



Photo: McKay Savage

tion, should something go wrong. Unwritten rules of trade have existed since time immemorial; they were robust enough and did not depend on the use of organised force or war, and were based on the reputation of the seller and the buyer, the reputation of the ruling authority and his honesty and were generally exemplified by a lack of excessive greed (The *Lex Mercatoria* trade rules were established much later). The problems which existed with this kind of trade were piracy, petty port theft or troubles arising due to bad weather.

Prominent amongst the Indian ports were Quilon, Muziris, Calicut (Kozhikode), Mangalore and Cambay (Khambhat) in Gujarat. This piece will refer mainly to the well documented port town of Calicut in Malabar and certain Red sea ports such as Fustat (old Cairo) and Aden; to study 'the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across borders' which was made effective by the trading communities comprising Karimis, Maghribis, Bohras, Chettis and Vanias to name a few.

Why was Calicut a confluence for all these different types of people? It started out with an honest reputation of the port and town, its people, its ruler and of course the local implementation of a tough legal system. Calicut—the city of truth—"is a perfectly secured harbour, which, like that of Ormuz, brings together merchants from every city and from every country" wrote Abdu Razzak in 1445, whereas Ma Huan writing at about the same time (1450) noted—"The great country of the Western ocean is precisely this country." The neutrality of port administration is evidenced by the fact that Ibrahim Bandar, the port official was a Bahraini.

At the other end of the trade route in Fustat, there were wealthy medieval Jewish traders of Tunisian descent dealing through Jewish and Muslim agents settled in Calicut and Mangalore. In the case of Aden, there were both Maghribi and Karimi traders, and many an Indian trader, conducting and directing the disbursement and loading of goods and issuing instructions. The goods landed in Aden went on camel back to Alexandria where Venetian merchants transported them over water to European ports. The Yemen Sultan collected port charges (Marco Polo calls them hefty charges).

In Calicut, the Zamorin's port agents also collected a fixed customs duty for profit and maintenance of the harbour. Thus trade was not a state administered enterprise in these three distant locations but was in private hands, working with state sponsorship.

Madmun Ibn Bandar, the wealthiest and most

influential trader of the 1100-1200 AD period, was the *nagid* or trustee of the Jewish Aden traders. His network covered the areas between Malabar coasts in India and today's Spain. Between these individuals and communities, and a cosmopolitan expatriate set-up in Calicut and Mangalore (comprising Muslim and Jewish agents), was built the earliest example of globalised trade. As agents, people like Abraham Yiju settled down in Mangalore, married locally and conducted trade for Madmun for some 14 years, corresponding over letters sent back and forth in the ships that met these shores.

India had the world's largest economy (around 33 percent of global GDP) in the first century AD. This dropped to around 25 percent by 1500 AD. China and Europe too contributed around a quarter of the world's GDP.

To get a perspective of the volume of business conducted, one must study examples of some of the goods and their direction of flow and note that the traded commodity was just not merely spices. In addition, the export from Malabar comprised of iron ore, brass, bronze, dyes, silk and cotton textiles. It imported gold, silver, silk, dry fruits, horses, porcelain and aromatics. Calicut was also a trans-shipment point for paper, ink, spices and much more. Chinese ships also ferried and traded commodities needed in Calicut such as rice from Bengal and Orissa during their voyages. Sugar, and wheat found their way on these ships and fought for space amidst other high-price low-bulk merchandise and sometimes even competed with people and horses for space. Much of the cargo that landed in Malabar found its way to wealthy buyers in the rich kingdom of neighbouring Vijayanagar.

This description would be incomplete without touching upon the Eastern shores of India. Arab traders and seamen generally avoided the oceans on the Eastern side of India. Coromandel trade was administered mainly by Marakkayars settled in Malabar, Ceylon, and Kayalpatanam; the Chinese sailing from Zeitoun; and the Gujarati community trading out from Cambay via Pulicat with the far eastern ports. Chinese junks linked ports on the South China Sea and the Malayan coast with the Malabar.

Chinese traders had been trading with Malabar since very early times, moving through ports—Quilon, Muziris and finally Calicut—as these ports rose up and fell from grace. The Chinese brought in gold, silver, silk, incense and purchased sandalwood and cotton. A major port of call for Zheng He's treasure fleet during his seven voyages from 1405 to 1433 AD was Calicut.

In order to understand the trading diaspora better, one must also take a quick look at the sailors, the ship-owners and their contracts. The ships were primarily owned by Arab traders and captained by seasoned Arab sailors. Many a dhow was owned by Indians of the trading caste, such as the Vanias of Cambay, the Chettis of the Coromandel, Marakkars merchants and in one case even a Nambiar from North Malabar. These dhows, which ferried goods from ports across the Red Sea to Malabar, were usually about 100 to 250 tonne in capacity and were loaded to the brim. Sometimes these ships—many constructed in Calicut with Malabar teak—also carried pilgrims to Mecca on the Westerly trip.

Major Chinese trade during the Zheng He period was state-sponsored whereas the Arab and Indian traders were private individuals virtually born into that caste or trade. Imagine the trading community in Calicut or Fustat or Aden: the markets would be teeming with Tamil Chettis, Gujarati Vanias, Tunisian Jews, Karimi traders, Maghrabhi Arabs and Jews, Italians, Turks, Persians, African slaves, Chinese, various half castes, Malabar Moplahs, black Jews and Syrian Christians.

In Calicut, accounts would be kept by learned senior Chettis (who according to Ma Huan in 1430 did not use even an abacus to do calculations) and armed escort was provided by the Nairs. A score of languages and innumerable dialects may have been spoken in those narrow streets. Many religions were practised without animosity, and a port town like Calicut even provided separate areas for living and worship for each community, all laid out in strict accordance to the ancient Hindu *Vaastu* system.

It was as if nature itself had deemed that trade had to be conducted where the winds stopped. No trader likes undue risks. Once risk was taken out of the trade equation or mitigated, trade continued smoothly with the periodic monsoon winds that brought the ships in and took them out of Malabar ports. Payment was assured by the appointed local agents (usually from the same community or nationality as the trader) and the risk of loss and theft was well covered by the power and reputation of the local king. As far as business itself was concerned, trust was paramount and since it took many months for goods to reach the destination, with payment made using bartered goods or even money going back the same way, the role of the agent and the ship's captain was vital.

Coinage, contracts, and commodity pricing were also important. A good example of striking

an agreement in Calicut is provided by Ma Huan in his book *Ying-Yai Sheng-lan* or 'The Overall Survey of the Oceans' Shores' which concludes "whether the price be dear or cheap, we will never repudiate it or change it." With respect to coinage, the Zamorins ruled Malabar with the firm control over the mint.

So important was trade in Malabar that many wars between local principalities such as Calicut and Cochin were fought over trade and port rights. The medieval trade scene changed with the arrival of Portuguese who used force to regulate and control trade and to establish monopolies. With the arrival of the Portuguese, state-sponsored colonisation took root. But in the later part of the sixteenth century, private enterprise rose to prominence once again with the Portuguese Casados taking over state sponsored trade in the late sixteenth century. It later continued

Calicut—the city of truth—was at the forefront of globalisation because of its honest reputation and tough implementation of the law.

with the Dutch and the English East India companies. Trade became subjugation and globalisation became a form of colonisation; the two East India companies became the greatest examples of global corporations.

In time Malabar was incorporated into Kerala when India became an independent country and its history was forgotten. Between 1500 and 2000 AD, the bottom fell out of India's economic bucket—from a quarter of the world economy to a small fraction of it. The city of Calicut has changed as well. There is no port activity, though the city is still a bustling commodity trading centre and the roads teem with activity. The Moplahs—descendants of Arab traders—are sometimes a discontented lot, but maintain religious harmony and are slowly integrating with the other communities. The Jews, Chettis and Gujaratis are gone, so also all the other *paradesis*.

Today's resident of Malabar is a far weaker supporter of globalisation. But the state is slowly opening up and joining the rest of the nation. The famed Calico looms can no longer be found; pepper is still produced but the flourishing trade networks are gone.



Photo: Luca Penati

THE BAY OF BENGAL

Eastern sea, golden lands

One day, around a thousand years ago...

ANAND KRISHNAMOORTHI

The *Purvasamudhram* was finally quiet after two days of incessantly tossing the boat about. Sokkan the old man still sat in his usual spot near the Kudirai Chettis, the horse merchants. Here was another chance for him to brag about the strength of the vessel and the thoughtfulness of the crew. They had come through the storm mostly unscathed and were just past Manakkavaram. The young officer had taken a liking to Sokkan despite the blighter's ability to constantly disparage the Cholas. Vikramadityan was twenty-five and had already proved himself an able soldier and commander of men. He was from Uraiur and came from a family that had for generations been utterly loyal to the Cholas. His ancestors had fought at Takkolam. It was now 1026 AD. Rajendra Chola was rapidly expanding the empire his father Rajaraja had first taken out of the Indian mainland—the Chola empire that began growing out of the narrow fertile zone around the Kaveri river in the Tamil country.

The boat was on its way to Kadaram on the

Malay peninsula and Vikraman was sure that he would be given some messy administrative problems to fix in the new territories. The Srivijaya capital was taken but the Sailendra army did not seem to be giving up that easily. Not that anyone expected any different.

Sokkan claimed he used to be a merchant adventurer. Now he was dressed in the garb of a hermit. As is custom, a hermit's origin is never sought. His old *Prasasti* proudly placed his ex-guild's origin in Ayyavole. He was a *Nandesi* and he might as well have been from all the thousand directions of their lore. He might have never ever left their Pudukkottai base, but his stories were all filled with exotic countries and ports. He had bought horses from the Arabs, sold perfume to the Chinese, fought pirates off Manakkavaram. He even claimed to have once had a tryst with a *Yavava* woman at the Kodungallur lighthouse. This man had all the cockiness, irreverence, and lewd jokes of the typical sailor. He was a saffron-clad Shaivite hermit now. Proper sailors would have

kept better birds with them. All he had was a tatty old crow, probably as old as himself.

A couple of days after they left Korkai, Vikraman had found the old man entertaining his servants. At that time Vikraman's thoughts were elsewhere. He was cursing his brother Parthiban for having booked him on this merchant fleet. He would have much preferred to have travelled with his soldiers and fellow officers on those warships. Partiban had suggested that his first overseas voyage should be spent in relative luxury. But Vikraman's stomach was not in any position to appreciate any of it. The old man's smelly, sour, herbal concoction was more than welcome relief. So was his company.

Sokkan made it clear right from the start that he was not a big fan of the war and the conquest. His opinion of the ruling family was not too charitable either. He kept talking about the time Sundara Chola's crown prince Aditya was murdered. He insisted it had something to do with Uttama Chola, Rajendra's grand uncle who had ruled briefly before his father Rajaraja's reign. Vikraman, like most of his ilk kept his silence about that incident. His grandfather, who had served under Sundara Chola actually quit active duty and went back to tend his farm when Uttama ascended the throne. That was until finally Rajaraja became regent and called him back to Thanjavur. Only those with wild imaginations and wilder tongues were left to spew outrageous conspiracy theories. Sokkan spoke about palace intrigue, family insiders, some Pandyan spies, a Sinhala prince, and a mysterious woman. "But whatever is to be said" he continued, "They did figure out a way of sorting out succession disputes. Masterstroke really, making your son the co-regent. In China, fathers have their sons killed."

Thankfully for Vikraman the topic of discussion changed when Sokkan learned more about his work. He did have some praise for the Cholas for having left local administration decentralised and granting a great deal of autonomy to the Nagarams and the Nagarattars. "I have been to a few countries and everything happens around the capital, and you pay your taxes to the king who deigns to have that money redistributed at his will." Vikraman smiled briefly while Sokkan continued. "Your emperor, like his father before him, is working hard at reviving trade with the Chinese. And that country is a perfect example of how bad internal politics makes a nation insular and dysfunctional to the outside world. In our country we at least know how the king steals our money. Parakesari (Rajendra Chola) also exempts characters like me from taxes"

"I'm glad you find something good about the Emperor. The General was telling me how we would have to let the merchants do their job, and how we need more Nagarams and specialised trading centres in all our new territories. We do love business and trade. But tell me old man" Vikraman asked, "why are you not in your guild anymore and why do you not appreciate the empire growing and expanding open trade under the Tamil Crown?"

"Sometimes the Crown cannot see the difference between trade and traders, business and businessmen, nations and guilds. And who said I don't trade anymore? Except I now deal in a commodity that some businessmen and most politicians find no use in. And it is also tax free!"

"Wisdom and love" Vikraman said, repeating the line his servants had picked up from Sokkan like a mantra.

"What is with you and foreigners" Vikraman continued. "That deal with the Chinese does not

Your emperor, is working hard at reviving trade with the Chinese. And that country is a perfect example of how bad internal politics makes a nation insular and dysfunctional to the outside world. In our country we at least know how the king steals our money.

mean we love them. Just that we'd be better off not fighting them, but doing business with them instead."

"And Sangrama Vijayottunga Varman was not a big fan of you directly dealing with the Chinese was he?"

"Kadaram had to be conquered. Trade had to be freed up" the young man justified.

"Maybe it was just a rich country that also happened to be in the way?"

"Maybe it is just another foreign nation that needs to be taught some proper Tamil values and culture"

"Ah!" the old man exclaimed. "Foreigners needing to be taught the Tamil way... This is where your pride fails you and makes you sound like a slab of stone. A stone slab on a grand temple wall, filled with as much information and as much polemic. But yet, a stone slab."

Vikraman was not amused.

Many of the men on board truly believed that the old man held within him the spirits of sailors from the dawn of time, and that he could even

predict the future. "Let me explain", he said, masterfully keeping the aura of a sage. "There were merchant adventurers even before the Cholas or the Pallavas..."

He told their stories like they were his own. Of the older boats that could only sail during the windy seasons. Of having stumbled onto strange lands with strange foreigners until they were better known as the Suvarnadvipam.

"We had taken Tamil to the corners of the world before you warriors even thought of subjugating those people with your swords. And you think you are bringing Tamil to those lands? The people you have fought are your own kind, people who speak the same language and worship the same gods. All thanks to years of trade and negotiation and deals and treaties which we managed to have in place. I would claim that your position is very convenient."

"Frankly old sir, despite what you say, by your own admission, our Empire is the better run than most in this world. Do you want us to give up the world like you, don saffron robes and preach love?"

"Oh I would expect nothing of that sort. Stick to your *dharma*. But you could at least abandon your pride. Nothing lasts forever. The Cholas will not last forever."

Sokkan paused. He knew the young man was aware of the Sri Lankan situation.

"You thought Mahinda was defeated and the Tiger flag would fly over Lanka forever? Today, he is the hunted, tomorrow things could entirely be the other way around. Mahinda will return and hunt your down. If not now, later, and do you think he is going to love you for all that you have done in his land. His loyal Pandyan allies too are waiting for you to fall."

Vikraman did not respond.

"Let your emperor decide", Sokkan continued "What does he want to leave behind for someone a thousand years later to see and learn. Marvels in stone, or lessons in history?

All this came back to Vikraman as he sat in the barracks at Kadaram a few months after that voyage. Then Sokkan's pithy observations seemed to be less caustic, and Vikraman would dare admit, even true. That morning there was another ambush outside the camp, and the week before, two ships were sunk. This war seemed to never end. Maybe like the old man said, Vikraman thought, it might go on for a hundred years.

Back on the boat, that day Vikraman's slightly wounded ego tried to salvage something from Sokkan's barrage. "Pride! Well I am proud to be in the army that cleared this sea of the menace of

piracy. You have fought them yourself. Aren't you glad that your emperor could do that for you now?"

"And he certainly gets paid in gold for his services" Sokkan promptly replied "He can have his capital city cross the river, yet there are perils in these seas which even the mighty Rajendra cannot surmount"

And that was just before the storm hit.

That fearful sea surge certainly dented, if not shattered Vikraman's hubris and his already delicate digestive system. The sailors worked through their practised routine. Techniques perfected over centuries. The boat survived in remarkably good condition. The only one with casualties were the navy's pilot vessel that veered off course and was found a day later with half its crew missing.

On that calm morning after the storm. Sokkan's crow crept out of his box, flew out and came back with a throbbing fish in its beak. Clever bird. The old man traded his catch with the Kudirai Chetti's handler for an extra ration of fresh water with which he boiled poor Vikraman more herbal medicine.

"In the old days, if a storm lasted more than a few days. We would draw lots thrice, and the unlucky sailor would be lowered down on a bamboo raft for having brought ill-luck upon us. We did that to a Chinaman once. But that never works with the Arabs. And talking of Arabs, there will be a day when both sides weakened by your war would lose to those smart chaps who have been waiting for you to consolidate your conquests. They'll just pluck them out of your hands. Can you imagine the trade on the *Purvasamudhram* and the *Aparasamudhram* run under the banner of the Arab?"

"Rubbish" said Vikraman. "The Arabs conquering Srivijaya because we have weakened it? You must be joking" But he knew it was no use arguing with the old man. In a tone as much meant to humour the man as to mock him said. "Maybe, just maybe if by some miracle, the Chinese can learn enough magic to put the Chola army to sleep, they too could also conquer us huh?"

"Hmm" Sokkan murmured theatrically "Now you know why we lower Chinese men down to the sea on bamboo rafts?"

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THE NORTHWEST

The tribal militias of the Frontier

The British had terrible luck purchasing their loyalty

JOSHUA FOUST

ONE of the ideas recently circulating around US policy circles is utilising a tribal militia of some sort to address otherwise intractable security issues. The “Sons of Iraq,” as the Anbar Awakening came to be known in the US government, seems to be a popular model for problems everywhere: with the Pentagon, one can find “Sons of...” ideas for Afghanistan, Pakistan, and even Somalia.

One western power in particular, however, has a long history of using these tribal militias in pursuit of its interests. Perhaps most famously along the Northwest Frontier in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British empire employed multiple types of militias and community defence organisations in an attempt to secure their border along Afghanistan. Examining their creation, successes, and failures, lends substantial lessons for today.

Probably the earliest deliberate use of tribal elements in providing security along the Northwest Frontier was the Queen’s Own Corps of Guides, formed in Peshawar in 1846. Created by Sir Henry Lawrence, the Corps of Guides was a mixed infantry and cavalry force that had a Pashtun majority, though there were some other ethnic groups involved in its early days—most notably Sikhs.

Very quickly, the Guides developed into an elite force with a strong reputation in the Indian Army. In contrast with later militia groups, the Guides did not elevate their tribal or communal loyalties above that of their unit. During the Second Anglo-Afghan War, a group of the Corps of Guides accompanied the British contingent and stood guard at the embassy they established in Kabul. After the signing of the Treaty of Gandamak, an angry mob attacked the embassy in Kabul, killing all the Englishmen inside, including Sir Louis Cavagnari, the British Resident. After their deaths, the remaining Corps of Guides were offered safe passage back to India if they laid down their arms; all, however, refused, and fought to the death. This sort of devotion made them legends in the British empire.

By 1878, the Frontier Scouts, whose members were drawn directly from local tribes, entered service along the Northwest Frontier. Their primary mission was policing the Khyber Pass, a job the Scouts did with little fanfare, budget, or firepower. Part of this was born of necessity—the British were wary of imposing too much change on a people they considered primitive—but part was born of an ingrained distrust in the Scouts’ loyalty. This distrust kept them lightly armed and at arm’s length. The importance of this distance came to matter a great deal during the Third Anglo-Afghan War, when King Amanullah Khan capitalised on the growing weakness of British rule along the Frontier and marched as far as the city of Thal in Parachinar. During this war, many Pashtuns in the Frontier Scouts deserted to fight alongside the Afghans.

One of the most visible successes the British had with tribal militias was in the war against the Faqir of Ipi from 1936 to 1947, also known as the Tori Khel Rebellion. Led by a charismatic Islamic fundamentalist leader named Haji Mirza Ali Khan, or the Faqir of Ipi, all of Waziristan collapsed into violence. After a few months of sustained fighting, the Tori Khel came to a peace jirga. Despite this, there remained a serious problem of cross-border tribal militancy from Afghanistan—militants continued to cross the Durand Line and launch attacks. This postponed the fighting until well into 1939, not fully petering out until the 1940s.

In his diary-like account of an early period of the war, Geoffrey Moore, for example, noted that they could only threaten entire communities with violent reprisals should attacks on British troops continue—a provision written into the very laws of Pakistan’s tribal areas.

The Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR), which was first drafted in 1872 but made law in 1903, enshrines the role of Sharia in judicial settlements in FATA. This brought the areas under de facto British control, but exempted the area’s residents from de jure British rule. A key enforcement clause of the FCR is the idea of collective or com-

munal punishment, in which an entire community is held responsible for the actions of an individual or group of individuals. While Moore highlights one way this could be effective, today collective punishment could be classified as a crime against humanity.

The British found terrible luck, at least in the long term, in purchasing the loyalty of tribal groups. During the First Anglo-Afghan War, for example, the loyalty of local Pashtuns from Rawalpindi to Kabul was purchased in gold. When the gold ran out in 1842, however, and the Pashtuns demanded even more than the British had paid before, the result was the disaster at Gandamak. FW Johnston, who wrote the briefing paper for

fought off the tribes, and though there remained holdouts in Upper Swat they never reprimanded.

Furthermore, the tribal militias were not guarantors of security. HRC Pettigrew tells the story of the Frontier Scouts' aggressive push into Ladha, "the highest of the Scouts' posts." It was deep into Mehsud territory, and relations with them were always restless.

While tribal issues in NWFP were not a significant factor during the anti-Soviet jihad (most of the tribes' energy, save some fighting amongst the different warlord factions, was spent trying to kill Soviets), tribal issues again rose to prominence in the 1990s. During this time, the Pakistani government actively encouraged militancy in many of the NWFP and FATA districts as a deliberate strategy to build up "fanatical" religious soldiers to fight India in Jammu & Kashmir. These zealot-tribals also took advantage of the relative lawlessness and anarchy in Afghanistan and increased their cross-border economic and military activities, often doing tours fighting both for the Taliban and in low-intensity conflicts in Kashmir. This was openly practised until just after September 11, 2001; since the US invasion of Afghanistan, such activity has become much more proscribed.

The recent calls within the US for a "Sons of Pakistan" program—such as a late 2007 decision to "partner" with renowned militant leader Maulvi Nazir—reflect an unsettling ignorance of the use of these militias in the tribal areas of Pakistan. For its part, the Pakistani government has steadfastly refused to arm or otherwise support home-grown tribal militias for reasons many Americans find inexplicable. The answer lies buried in history, one few westerners have ever much explored.

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The Frontier Crimes Regulations penalises an entire community for the actions of individuals or groups. While this is effective sometimes, it could well be classified as a crime against humanity.

future political agents to the area, noted that they promised the Ahmadzais vast tracts of land in return for help in providing security. It is unclear the Pakistani government could bring about a similarly appealing set of incentives for reduced militancy.

Another challenge the British faced was the periodic rise of charismatic figures that used prophecies and appeals to tribal and Islamic loyalties to urge the local Pashtuns to rebel. In the Dir district of the FATA in 1897, a man known only as the Mad Mullah incited a series of violent attacks on the camps in Dir and western Swat. After a rapid movement of reinforcements, the British

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Photo: Craig Sheldon

REVIEW

A Muslim traveller's tales

Across the Dar-ul-Islam in the 14th century

JAYAKRISHNAN NAIR

THE FIRST thing that Prof Matthew Herbst asks students to do in the introductory lecture of the series New Ideas/Clash of Cultures at University of California, San Diego is to draw a map of the world and label as many countries as possible. A minute later they are asked to keep their pens down and name the country at the centre of the map. Some have Italy, a few have North America, and some the Atlantic Ocean.

This instinctive action, which illustrates the cultural bias of historians, is amplified if education starts with the typical Western Civilisation till 1600 followed by the Western Civilisation since 1600 course. A student could thus specialise in the Ancient Near East with tangential knowledge about India, China, Africa, or the Muslim empires.

Affinity towards one's homeland is natural, but it should be balanced with knowledge about

Review

The Adventures of Ibn Battuta: A Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century

by Ross E Dunn

University of California Press, 379 pages, 2004

other civilisations. It is natural that for Indians, the centre of their world is India, but when they read about the Buddha, knowledge of the Axial age—when Socrates, the Jewish prophets, and Confucius revolutionised think-

ing—gives better perspective. Such perspective provides awareness that the empiricism of John Locke and scepticism of David Hume could be derived from the dialogue between Indra and Prajapati in *Chandogya Upanishad*. Proper context for local history will be obtained by taking an introductory course in World Civilisation instead of Western Civilisation, as well as by reading the works of ancient travellers like Ibn Battuta.

The Rihla

In 1325, this twenty-one year old Moroccan left home to perform the *haj*. In fact he visited Mecca

four times—first from Morocco via North Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Syria, the second after visiting Iraq and Persia, the third after going down the Swahili coast up to Tanzania and the final one after visiting Anatolia, Delhi, Calicut, Maldives and China. When he returned to Morocco, surviving the Black Plague that devastated Europe, he had visited about forty countries in the modern map covering a distance of 117,000 km.

Settling down in Tangier he collaborated with a young literary scholar, Ibn Juzayy, to compose the *rihla*—a book of travels in Arabic literature—about his impressions of all the countries and his experience which included working as a judge for Mohammed bin Tughluq, becoming penniless near the Doab, and attempting a coup in Maldives.

Since Ibn Battuta wrote his *rihla* towards the end of his itinerant career, some details are incorrect and fuzzy; after visiting Constantinople, Ibn Battuta was impressed by the markets, monasteries and the Genoese colony of Galata while in reality, by that time, it was a city on the decline. Also his book is not an encyclopaedia; he wrote about

some selling drugs and food items in Mecca, some as pages accompanying Princess Bayalun of the Golden Horde, and some scholars in Oman. He knew that Indian ships sailed to Aden regularly. He also knew that the Delhi sultanate welcomed foreigners and paid well.

It is interesting to contrast some of the places Ibn Battuta visited with their current state. Mogadishu, currently invokes the images of civil war, militias and poverty, but at the time of Ibn Battuta's visit, it was one of the richest ports owing to the connections with the Horn of Africa and Ethiopia. Ibn Battuta met the ruler, Abu Bakr, who wore a "robe of green Jerusalem stuff" above "fine loose robes of Egypt with a wrapper of silk." During a meal of chicken, meat, fish, green ginger, mangoes and pickled lemon, he observed that a single resident of Mogadishu ate more than a whole company of visitors.

While the Mongols had reduced Baghdad to a small provincial town, Cairo was prospering under the Mamluk sultanate—members of a slave dynasty—due to the Red Sea trade. Jerusalem, which was under Mamluk control, was a small town of no great importance; Ibn Battuta spent a week there meeting various scholars and Sufi masters. By the time he arrived in Delhi, Mohammed bin Tughluq, who had succeeded the Slave Dynasty, had finished his controversial experiment in shifting capitals. A seven year drought and the first of the twenty-two rebellions that would bring his downfall was about to start.

On his first visit, the sultan's mother gave Ibn Battuta 2000 silver dinars. Even before he got the job of the judge, Tughluq ordered him to be paid 5000 silver dinars and the revenue from two villages. On his appointment, he got 12,000 dinars as perquisite with an annual salary of 12,000 dinars. According to Dr Dunn, at that time an average Hindu family lived on 5 dinars per month; a soldier, 20.

Even though he was rich, the cost of living in Delhi was high. The hamster that kept the Delhi's economic wheel turning, much like the present, was sycophancy. Nobles borrowed money to buy expensive gifts for the sultan and other nobles, who then reciprocated with gifts of higher value. Soon Ibn Battuta amassed debts of more than 55,000 dinars to get out of which, quite interestingly, he composed an ode to the Sultan.

Also he faced first hand the job risks in working with a pixilated Sultan. Tughluq took umbrage at Ibn Battuta's association with a Sufi ascetic who had fallen out of favour. Tughluq first got the ascetic's beard plucked hair by hair, then later tortured and beheaded him. Ibn Battuta was

Ibn Battuta's travels showcase the importance of Muslim trade networks and the prosperity it bought to the trading communities in India and elsewhere.

things which fascinated him, like saints, life among the upper crust of society, and Muslim culture.

So using the *rihla* as spine, Ross E Dunn has fleshed out this book by providing the history of each city that Ibn Battuta visited. The chapter on Anatolia provides a brief history of the transformation of a country of Greek and Armenian Christians into Turkey and the sections on Cairo and Delhi provides background information on how they both rose to prominence, thanks to the Mongol empire. Since Ibn Battuta's objects of fascination were few, Dr Dunn juxtaposes the missing pieces from other history books and writings from other travellers like Simon Semeonis, Ludolph von Suchem, and Ibn Jubayr, making this book comprehensive.

Ibn Battuta's World

Some time after the first *haj* Ibn Battuta heard about India's riches and wanted to seek employment there. He already had exposure to Indians;

put under house arrest for nine days and expected to be executed. Surprisingly he was freed and entrusted with a mission to China.

Arriving in Calicut and Quilon on his way to China as the Mughal emissary to the Mongol court carrying a gift of 200 Hindu slaves, he found that the entire trade of the Malabar and Coromandel coast was controlled by Muslims. He also found that the Hindu rulers of those provinces allowed Muslims to worship as they pleased and encouraged these trade communities. Also, similar to the frequent battles between the countries on the African coast, battles among small provinces along the Indian west coast was also common and Ibn Battuta participated in the battle by Honavar against Sandapur (Goa).

Ibn Battuta's travels showcase the importance of Muslim trade networks and the prosperity it bought to the trading communities in India and elsewhere. He travelled during a period of relative calm; the crusades were over, the Mongols were Islamised and the Muslim caravan routes throbbed with activity carrying not just merchants, but scholars, craftsmen, Sufis and converts. Thus a Muslim grandee seized by wander-

lust could travel through Dar al-Islam staying in mosques, or with the scholars, kings, and saints receiving gifts of robes, horses and camels.

The relative peace during Ibn Battuta's time soon changed. In China, Genghis Khan's heir fled with his entire court unable to halt the advance of the rebels. The Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople and turned the Hagia Sophia into a mosque. Timur invaded Delhi and by his own account killed 10,000 infidels in an hour. The most important event happened, a century later, in the Malabar coast with the arrival of Vasco da Gama's fleet. This was not just a great navigational feat, but a major geo-political event by which Europeans cut off the Muslim middlemen.

Dr Dunn's book presents Ibn Battuta's world not in isolation, but in a global context helping us better understand the world of 14th century. It is not surprising that this book was required reading in Prof Herbst's class.

Jayakrishnan Nair writes about Indian history at *Varnam* (varnam.org) and is the guest editor of this special issue of *Pragati*.

IN EXTEENO

Foreign observations

Excerpts from perspectives on India

Megasthenes, c. 288 BC

(From *Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian*, by J W McCrindle, Trubner & Co, 1877)

The inhabitants, in like manner, having abundant means of subsistence, exceed in consequence the ordinary stature, and are distinguished by their proud bearing. They are also found to be well skilled in the arts, as might be expected of men who inhale a pure air and drink the very finest water.

It is accordingly affirmed that famine has never visited India, and that there has never been a general scarcity in the supply of nourishing food. For, since there is a double rainfall in the course of each year,—one in the winter season, when the sowing of wheat takes place as in other countries, and the second at the time of the summer solstice—the inhabitants of India almost always gather in two harvests annually: and even

should one of the sowings prove more or less abortive they are always sure of the other crop.

But, farther, there are usages observed by the Indians which contribute to prevent the occurrence of famine among them; for whereas among other nations it is usual, in the contests of war, to ravage the soil, and thus to reduce it to an uncultivated waste, among the Indians, on the contrary, by whom husbandmen are regarded as a class that is sacred and inviolable, the tillers of the soil, even when battle is raging in their neighbourhood, are undisturbed by any sense of danger, for the combatants on either side in waging the conflict make carnage of each other, but allow those engaged in husbandry to remain quite unmolested. Besides, they neither ravage an enemy's land with fire, nor cut down its trees. [The Ganges] which at its source is 30 stadia broad, flows from north to south, and empties its waters into the ocean forming the eastern boundary of the Gan-

garidai, a nation which possesses a vast force of the largest-sized elephants. Owing to this, their country has never been conquered by any foreign, king : for all other nations dread the overwhelming number and strength of these animals. [Thus Alexander the Makedonian, after conquering all Asia, did not make war upon the Gangaridai, as he did on all others; for when he had arrived with all his troops at the river Ganges, and had subdued all the other Indians, he abandoned as hopeless an invasion of the Gangaridai when he learned that they possessed four thousand elephants well trained and equipped for war.]

It is said that India, being of enormous size when taken as a whole, is peopled by races both numerous and diverse, of which not even one was originally of foreign descent, but all were evidently indigenous; and moreover that India neither received a colony from abroad, nor sent out a colony to any other nation.

Xuanzang, c. 629 AD

(From *Si-Yu-ki - Buddhist records of the Western world* *Hien Tsiang* by Samuel Beal, Vol I, Book II, Trubner & Co, 1884)

On examination, we find that the names of India (T'ien-chu) are various and perplexing as to their authority. It was anciently called Shin-tu, also Hien-tau; but now, according to the right pronunciation, it is called In-tu. The people of In-tu call their country by different names according to their district. Each country has diverse customs. Aiming at a general name which is the best sounding, we will call the country In-tu. In Chinese this name signifies the Moon.

The countries embraced under this term of India are generally spoken of as the five Indies. The entire land is divided into seventy countries or so.

Arrian (c. 145 AD) wrote "A sense of justice prevented any Indian king from attempting conquest beyond the limits of India". In 1904 Curzon argued that it is short-sighted to merely man the ramparts of India and not look beyond.

As the administration of the government is founded on benign principles, the executive is simple. The families are not entered on registers, and the people are not subject to conscription. The private demesnes of the crown are divided into four principal parts; the first is for carrying out the affairs of state and providing sacrificial offerings ;

the second is for providing subsidies for the ministers and chief officers of state; the third is for rewarding men of distinguished ability; and the fourth is for charity to religious bodies, whereby the field of merit is cultivated. In this way the taxes on the people are light, and the personal service required of them is moderate. Each one keeps his own worldly goods in peace, and all till the ground for their subsistence.

These who cultivate the royal estates pay a sixth part of the produce as tribute. The merchants who engage in commerce come and go in carrying out their transactions. The river-passages and the road-barriers are open on payment of a small toll. When the public works require it, labour is exacted but paid for. The payment is in strict proportion to the work done.

Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, 932 AD

(From *The Baburnama—Memoirs of Babur, prince and emperor*. Trans. by Wheeler M. Thackston, The Modern Library, 2002. Copyright © 1996. The Smithsonian Institution.)

Most of the provinces of Hindustan are located on flat terrain. So many cities and so many provinces—yet there is no running water anywhere. The only running water is in the large rivers. Even in cities that have the capability of digging channels for running water do not do so.

The cities and provinces of Hindustan are all unpleasant. All cities, all locales are alike. The gardens have no walls, and most places are flat as boards.

In Hindustan the destruction and building of villages and hamlets, even of cities, can be accomplished in an instant. Such large cities in which people have lived for years, if they are going to be abandoned, can be left in a day, even half a day, so that no sign or trace remains. If they have a mind to build a city, there is no necessity for digging irrigation canals or building dams. Their crops are all unirrigated. There is no limit to the people. A group gets together, makes a pond, or digs a well. There is no making of houses or raising of walls. They simply make huts from the plentiful straw and innumerable trees, and instantly a village or city is born.

Most of the people of Hindustan are infidels, whom the people of India call Hindu. In our country the people who move about the countryside have clan names, but in India even those who dwell in towns and villages have clan names. Every craft and trade is passed from father to son.

Hindustan is a place of little charm. There is no beauty in its people, no graceful social inter-

course, no poetic talent or understanding, no etiquette, nobility or manliness. The arts and crafts have no harmony or symmetry. There are no good horses, meat, grapes, melons, or other fruit. There is no ice, cold water, good food or bread in the markets. There are no baths and no madrasas. There are no candles, torches or candlesticks.

The one nice aspect of Hindustan is that it is a large country with lots of gold and money. Another nice thing is the unlimited numbers of craftsmen and practitioners of every trade. For every labour and every product there is an established group who have been practicing that craft or professing that trade for generations.

Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, 1904

(From *Lord Curzon in India*, a selection of his speeches, compiled by Thomas Raleigh, Macmillan, 1906)

(India) is like a fortress with the vast moat of the sea on two of her faces, and with mountains for her walls on the remainder. But beyond those walls, which are sometimes of by no means insuperable height and admit of being easily penetrated, extends a glacis of varying breadth and dimensions. We do not want to occupy it, but we also cannot afford to see it occupied by our foes. We are quite content to let it remain in the hands of our allies and friends; but if rival and unfriendly influences creep up to it, and lodge themselves right under our walls, we are compelled to intervene, because a danger would thereby grow up that might one day menace our security. This is the secret of the whole position in Arabia, Persia, Afghanistan, Tibet, and as far eastwards as Siam.

He would be a short-sighted commander who merely manned his ramparts in India and did not look out beyond; and the whole of our policy during the past five years has been directed towards maintaining our predominant influence and to preventing the expansion of hostile agencies on this area which I have described. It was for this reason that I visited that old field of British energy and influence in the Persian Gulf: and this also is in part the explanation of our movement into Tibet at the present time; although the attitude of the Tibetan Government, its persistent disregard of Treaty obligations, and its contemptuous retort to our extreme patience, would in any case have compelled a more active vindication of our interests.

I have had no desire to push on anywhere, and the history of the past five years has been one, not of aggression, but of consolidation and restraint. It

is enough for me to guard what we have without hankering for more.

Alice Albinia, 2008

(From *Empires of the Indus—The Story of a River*, by Alice Albinia, John Murray, 2008. Copyright © 2008. Alice Albinia)

In 2003, the oldest graves in the region were discovered in Chitral and Gilgit, the two far north-western provinces of Pakistan. For Pakistani archaeologists, this discovery vindicated their Aryan invasion hypothesis: the oldest graves were furthest north, they say, because these people entered the area from the north-west... 'They came through the Baroghil and Darkot passes directly into Chitral and Gilgit', I am told by Muhammad Zahir, a young archaeologist who led the excavations. Could this be the journey the Rig Veda appears to be hint at? India, it is written, has carried the tribes across 'many rivers' and 'through narrow passages'.

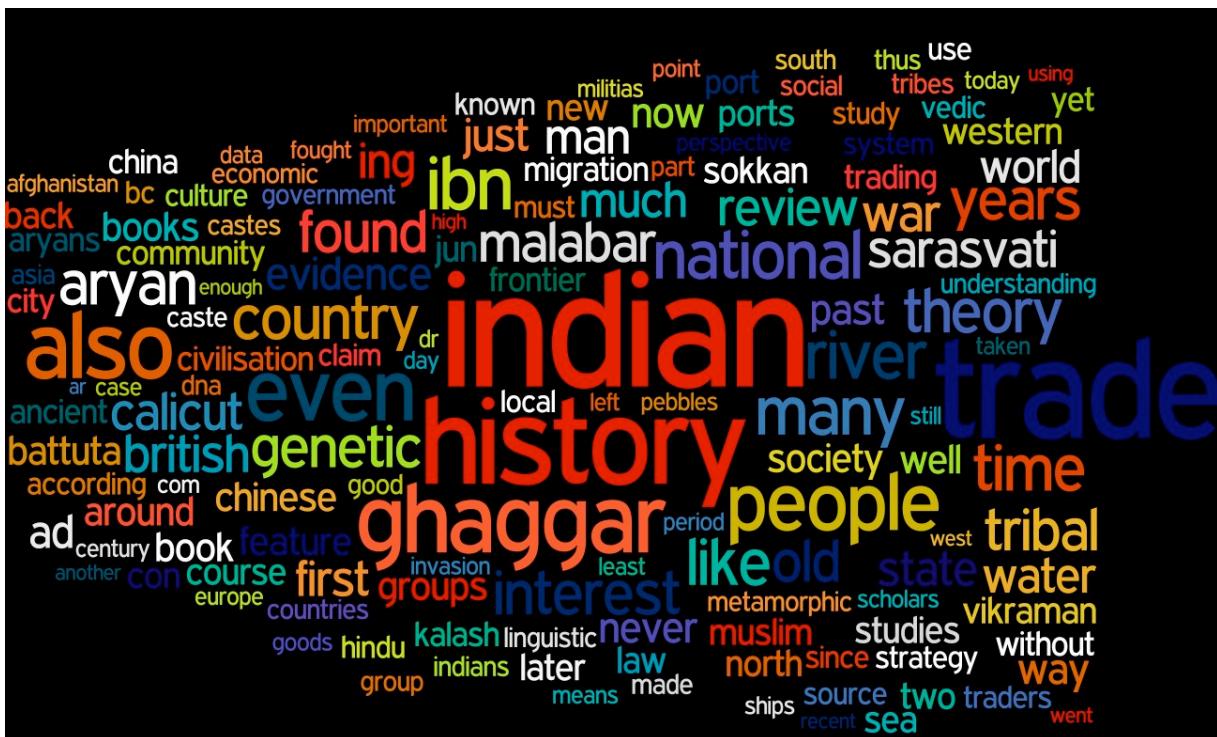
The Chitral graves have also reopened the debate over the origins of the Kalash people—one ancient graveyard was found in the Kalash village of Rumbur, and another on the site of a medieval Kalash fort. This, the archaeologists says, suggests that the Kalash are the long-lost Aryans, still living where their ancestors had three millenia. There is a tempting neatness to this theory.

Tradition is a fragile thing in a culture built entirely on the memories of the elders. Neither Muslim, Hindu nor Buddhist, the Kalash religion is syncretic, involving a pantheon of gods, sacred goats, and a reverence for river sources and mountaintops.

The Kalash have no holy book, and hence absorb influences idiosyncratically and seemingly at random. Such is the pressure from Islam in Bumboret, few young Kalash seem proud of their pantheon, or even to know of its existence.

The Kalash language, like that spoken in the rest of Chitral, is one of the most ancient of the Indo-European linguistic group—older than even the Rigvedic Sanskrit.

I find that I am being seduced by the easy parallels that can be drawn between Kalash and Rigvedic culture. But there are, unsurprisingly, serious gaps in the theory. The Kalash today have no special reverence for *agni* (fire), and the consider the cow, sacred to the Rig Veda, unclean...bones dug up from the 'Aryan' graves [have been sent to] America for DNA testing—to prove a genetic link between the dead Aryans and the living Kalash.



What's in this issue

The larger the word, the more frequently it occurs in the text.

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